

# *What does a frontier look like? The biocultural dynamics of the Lower Vistula borderland in the Middle Ages*

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# LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by  
Dóra Mérai  
and

Ágnes Drosztnér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,  
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,  
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



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# What Does a Frontier Look Like? The Biocultural Dynamics of the Lower Vistula Borderland in the Middle Ages

ALEKS PLUSKOWSKI\* – ALEX BROWN\*\* – SEWERYN SZCZEPAŃSKI\*\*\*  
– ROWENA BANERJEA\*\*\*\* – DANIEL MAKOWIECKI\*\*\*\*\*

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The expansion of Latin Christendom in the Middle Ages, sometimes referred to as “Europeanization,” is increasingly understood as the spectrum of encounters and the cultural dialectic between native and migrant populations.<sup>1</sup> These encounters took place at frontiers—the spaces across borders—complex, dynamic, and culturally permeable regions.<sup>2</sup> The study of medieval frontiers has demonstrated a range of local permutations, but also how the expansion of political authority from the end of the eleventh century AD, which created new borderlands with non-Christian societies, could be validated through the ideology of Christian holy war, and could be accompanied by attempts at cultural homogenization, partly by encouraging migrants to settle the conquered territories.<sup>3</sup> The end result, however, was determined by localized adaptations resulting from the character of frontier authorities, the selective adoption of native lifestyles, indigenous resistance, assimilation, and transformation of select cultural elements.

One of the most sensitive indicators of these adaptations is the “cultural landscape,”<sup>4</sup> the interactive space which shapes, and is simultaneously shaped by, human activity. Given the complex relationship between physical topography and conceptual space, this may be more usefully described as the “biocultural landscape,” a term recently adopted for defining the cultural value of sacred natural sites.<sup>5</sup> Between 2010 and 2014, The Ecology of Crusading project<sup>6</sup> investigated the environmental impact of crusading in the eastern Baltic region, especially associated with long-term trends in settlement. This short paper

draws on the results from this project to characterize the changing biocultural landscape of the shifting frontier in the Lower Vistula (modern north Poland), with a focus on the diachronic relationship between cultural and environmental trends. Its aim is to determine whether these two categories of trends can be related in defining a frontier.

## The Lower Vistula frontier

### *Cultural trends*

In the early medieval period, the eastern Lower Vistula region, north of the Kulmerland, represented a dynamic frontier between Pomerelian and Prussian societies.<sup>7</sup> Although topographically defined by the Vistula, along with its tributary the Nogat and their expansive floodplains, as well as a substantial corridor of woodland stretching from Wielbark down to Grudziądz, these natural features did not mark the borderland. Rather, the entire region, documented from the thirteenth century as the Old Prussian land of Pomesania, was the meeting point between these contrasting societies, particularly during the functioning of the trading emporium of Truso in the Late Viking Age. Truso was abandoned at the start of the eleventh century, but this was not accompanied by a contraction in settlement. By the twelfth century, the higher ground on the eastern side of the Nogat’s floodplain was studded with Pomerelian strongholds.<sup>8</sup> The largest settlement concentrations, as indicated by ceramic finds and scatters as well as toponyms, were found in the vicinity of the Forest of Sztum (Ger. *Stuhm*) and along the escarpments overlooking the Nogat, whilst the easternmost extent reached the Dzierżgoń River and Lake Drużno, where there was a large cluster of Prussian settlements in the vicinity of

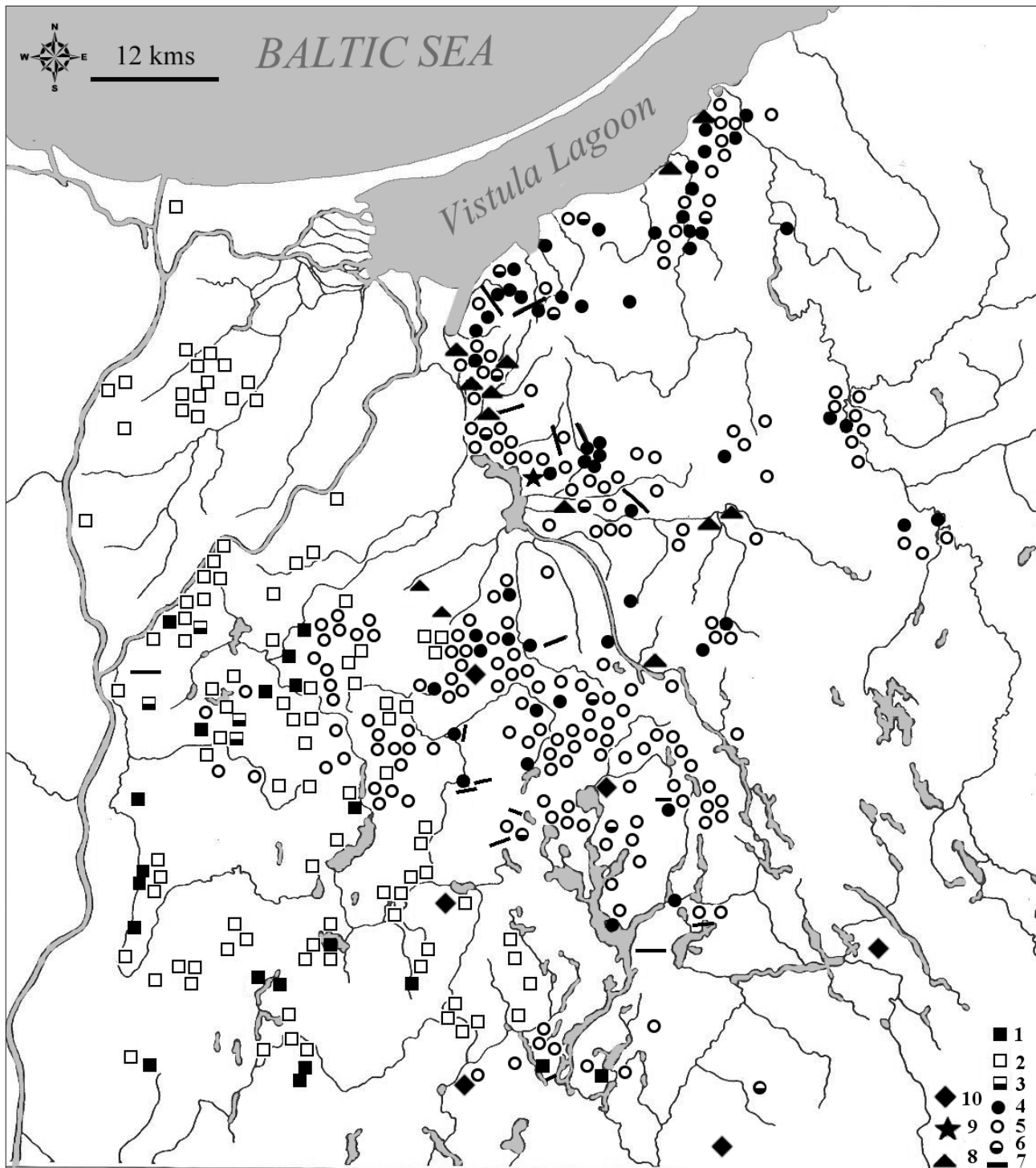
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► **Fig.1.** The distribution of Pomerelian and Prussian settlements in Pomesania in the pre-crusade period according archaeological and written sources (after Marek Jagodziński, "Podstawy źródłowe – analiza. Przekazy pisane – odkrycia archeologiczne" [The basics of sources - analysis. Written sources – archaeological discoveries], in *Pacifica Terra: Prusowie-Słowianie-Wikingowie u ujścia Wisły*, ed. Janusz Trupinda, (Malbork: Muzeum Zamkowe w Malborku, 2014), 38; with updated records from Seweryn Szczepański, *Pomezania Pruska: Dzieje osadnictwa w XIII-XV wieku* [Prussian Pomezania: History of the settlement in the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries] (Olsztyn: Ośrodek Badań Naukowych im. Wojciecha Kętrzyńskiego, 2016).

Key: 1: Slavic strongholds; 2: Slavic settlements; 3: Slavic cemeteries; 4: Prussian strongholds; 5: Prussian settlements (OPR lauks; Lat. campi); 6: Prussian cemeteries; 7: Substantial defensive embankments; 8: Traces of Scandinavian settlement; 9: Truso; 10: Early medieval hoards.





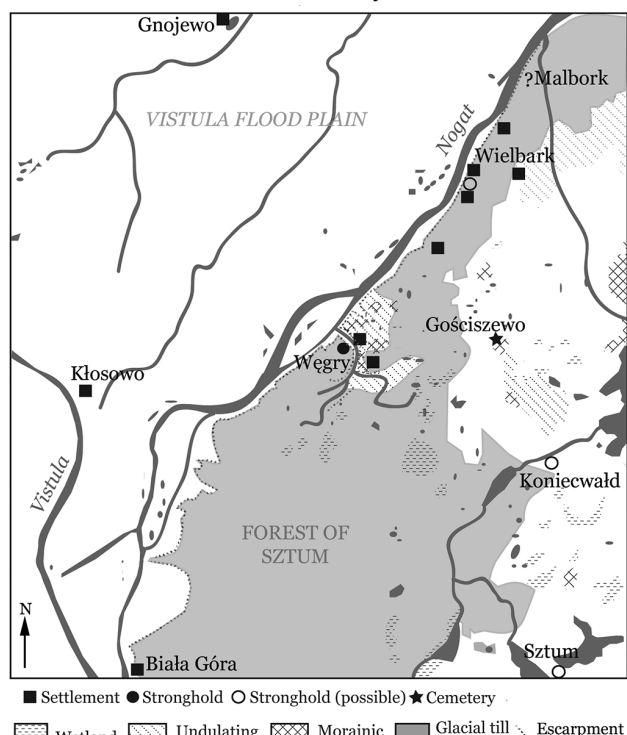
► **Fig. 2.** Prussian districts in Pomesania on a light relief map based on descriptions in thirteenth-century written sources, with Marienburg (Malbork), Marienwerder (Kwidzyn) and Christburg (Dzierzgoń) indicated for reference.

a major stronghold at Alt Christburg (Pol. Stary Dzierzgoń) (Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> Our knowledge of Prussian social organization remains limited, but the Treaty of Christburg (1249) and later documents suggest the region was organized into at least

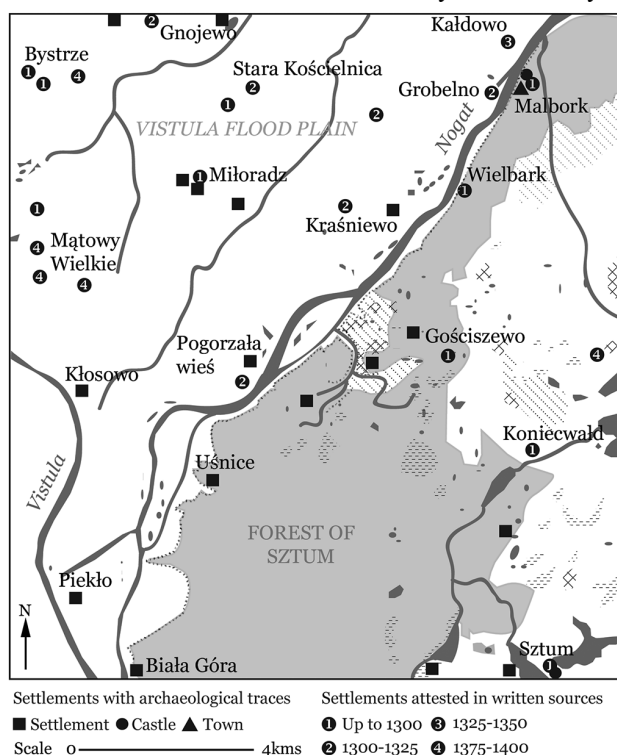
ten districts by then, some of which were incorporated into the Teutonic Order's later territorial delineations (Fig. 2).<sup>10</sup>

Archaeological evidence for the abandonment of Pomerelian strongholds in the second half of the twelfth century suggests this had become a volatile frontier, following Prussian westward migration and an increasingly aggressive foreign policy from Polish dukes inspired by crusading ideology. The majority of Pomerelian settlements do not continue into or beyond the thirteenth century (the site of Biała Góra on the western edge of the Forest of Sztum is an exception),<sup>11</sup> a trend typically interpreted as the result of Prussian aggression. The archaeological presence of Prussians in the Lower Vistula valley is ephemeral, contributing to the picture of a comparatively short-lived settlement before the arrival of crusading armies. Their presence was notable enough, however, that it resulted in the external perception of Pomesania as a Prussian territory by the time its borders were documented by the Teutonic Order.<sup>12</sup> Cistercian missionary efforts appear to have been partially

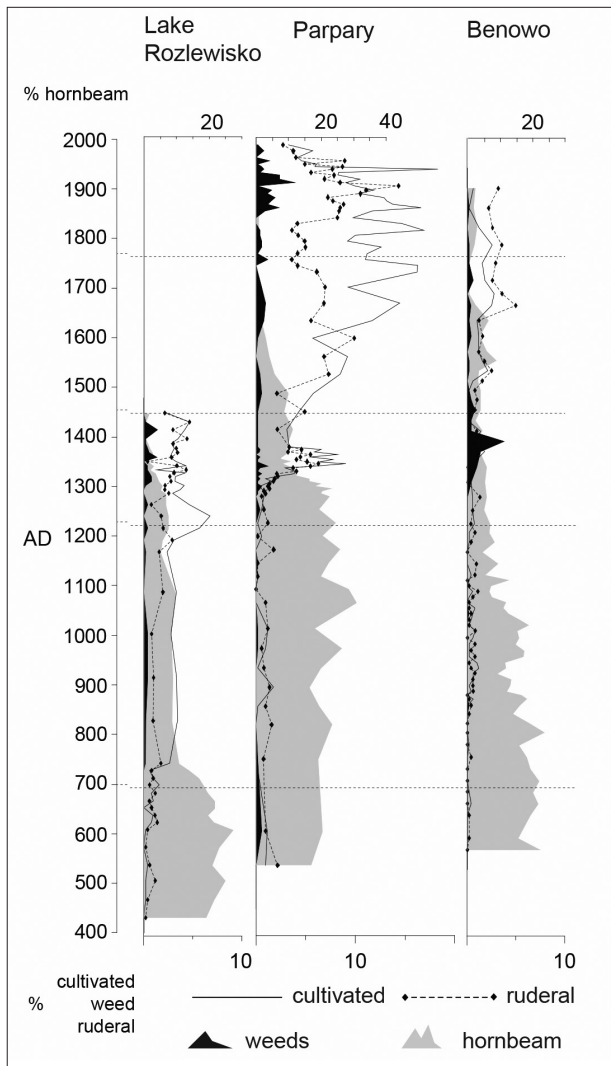
#### Settlement from the 9th-13th century



#### Settlement from the end of the 13th century - 15th century



► **Fig. 3.** Settlement changes in the southern part of the commandery of Marienburg on either side of the crusading period, after Mieczysław Haftka, "Mikroregion osadniczy Węgry-Gościszewo-Malbork w świetle kilkunastoletnich obserwacji terenowych" [The Węgry-Gościszewo-Malbork settlement micro-region in the light of several years of field observations], in *Badania archeologiczne w woj. elbląskim w latach 1980-83*, ed. Antoni Pawłowski (Malbork: Muzeum Zamkowe w Malborku, 1987), 27-42; with updated records; see Aleksander Pluskowski, ed., *Environment, Colonization and the Baltic Crusader States: Terra Sacra 1* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), in press.



► **Fig. 4.** Synthetic pollen diagrams from three sites in the landscape around Malbork and Sztum, for locations see Fig. 5.

successful at disseminating Christianity to Prussian communities across the region. This is suggested by the geographical specifications in the Treaty of Christburg requiring the Prussians to rebuild churches including in districts east of Dzierzgoń,<sup>13</sup> whilst Prussian natural sacred sites and cemeteries are largely found on the eastern side of Pomesania.<sup>14</sup> Prussian westward expansion was ultimately checked by the crusades, but Duke Swantopolk II of Gdańsk's support of the Prussian Uprising and subsequent war against the Order ensured the Lower Vistula frontier remained unstable into the 1250s. At this point the floodplain appears to have functioned as a political border until the Order acquired land on the western side of the Vistula in 1282,<sup>15</sup> and after the Order annexed Pomerelia in 1309 and relocated its head-



► **Fig. 5.** The Lower Vistula region today showing the extent of the Forest of Sztum (Google Earth 2015, MGGP Aero) with major towns and coring sites relating to Fig. 4 indicated in red.

quarters to Marienburg (Pol. Malbork), the region was transformed from a frontier into a political heartland (Fig. 3). Pomerelian and German migrants were encouraged to settle in planned or re-organized villages in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, although native Prussian communities were also present in smaller numbers.<sup>16</sup>

### Environmental trends

Corresponding changes in vegetation in this region are only observable east of the Vistula floodplain and suggest the development of a mosaic landscape with two main periods of woodland clearance and intensified cultivation (Fig. 4). The first is associated with early medieval Pomerelian colonization, starting broadly in the ninth century and continuing into the twelfth century, associated with the construction and occupation of strongholds. The Forest of Sztum formed a significant natural feature in the landscape and the fairly limited impact on it reflected the rather precarious nature of settlement. North and east of the woodland, however, there is evidence for more intensive clearance of woodland and agricultural intensification, with zooarchaeological data emphasizing pig rearing typical of the Slavic

settlement zone on the Lower Vistula.<sup>17</sup> There is also some evidence in pollen sequences for instability in the eleventh and twelfth century with declines in arable and meadowland.<sup>18</sup> This coincides with the abandonment of most of the settlement sites by or during the thirteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

The second phase of woodland clearance and agricultural intensification is associated with the crusades and subsequent colonization, characterized by a highly efficient and controlled management of the landscape. Grain was heavily regulated to meet the subsistence requirements of castles and towns, and along with timber, animal furs, honey and wax became increasingly lucrative exports to northwestern Europe from the fourteenth century. Even by the onset of the crusading campaigns the landscape of the Lower Vistula was predominantly cleared for arable and meadowland, intensifying with increasing colonization over the course of the fourteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

Increasing pressure on remaining timber supplies probably required careful management of existing resources, with every commandery likely containing areas of managed wood. The Forest of Sztum persisted despite increasing colonization around its fringes and pollen evidence suggests the maintenance of specific hardwood species. Moreover, documentary sources record the production of timber, charcoal, tar, honey, and wax, and many surrounding settlement names refer to nearby woodland.<sup>21</sup> The woodland of the late medieval period survived because it had practical uses, but probably retained much of the character of the early medieval woodland that itself persisted due to its location within a marginal, frontier landscape (Fig. 5). At the same time, zooarchaeological and historical data suggest wild species had been depleted by the late medieval period, with game provided for Marienburg from the park at Stuhm.<sup>22</sup> The stability provided by the political heartland also enabled the Order to conduct significant hydrological modifications in the region.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Frontiers are temporary spaces which are defined by the diachronic expansion and contraction of their opposing polities. In the Lower Vis-

tula, the frontier between Pomerelian and Prussian territories in the early medieval period lasted for several centuries, after which it shifted rapidly during the course of the crusading period. It was not defined by natural features, but rather by the extent of settlement which, in turn, depended on the degree of political stability. The impact of settlement can be gauged through associated paleoenvironmental records, where stability and population growth corresponded to increased deforestation and cultivation both before and after the crusades. The transformation of the region into a political heartland, however, saw a dramatic increase in human exploitation of the environment, a trend also visible in other parts of the Teutonic Order's territories. At the same time, the ethnic diversity of the former frontier was reflected in the mixture of late medieval communities, although the native population decreasingly features in the written sources whether as a result of cultural assimilation, demographic decline or a combination of both. In the context of the eastern Baltic, Prussia remains distinctive because of the substantial role migrants played in settling rural areas, but at the same time with its shifting borders it provides an excellent opportunity to understand the dynamic character of frontiers.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (London: Penguin, 1994); Nils Blomkvist, *The Discovery of the Baltic: The Reception of a Catholic World-System in the European North (AD 1075–1225)* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Bartlett and Angus Mackay, eds., *Medieval Frontier Societies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).
- <sup>3</sup> Bartlett and MacKay, *Medieval Frontier Societies*; David Abulafia and Nora Berend, eds., *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).
- <sup>4</sup> Hilary Birks, H. J. B. Birks, Peter Kaland, and Dagfinn Moe, eds., *The Cultural Landscape: Past, Present and Future*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- <sup>5</sup> Fabrizio Frascaroli and Bas Verschuuren, "Linking Biocultural Diversity and Sacred Sites: Evidence and Recommendations in the European Framework," in *Biocultural Diversity in Europe*, ed. Mauro Agnoletti and Francesca Emanuelli (Cham: Springer, 2016), 389–417.
- <sup>6</sup> ERC grant 263735TEC; Aleksander Pluskowski, ed., *Environment, Colonization and the Baltic Crusader States: Terra Sacra 1* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018); Aleksander Pluskowski, ed., *Ecologies of Crusading, Colonization and Religious Conversion in the Medieval Baltic, Terra Sacra 2* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).
- <sup>7</sup> Seweryn Szczepański, "Nomen (atque) omen? O wartościowaniu granic i pogranicza w średniowiecznej i nowożytnej



przestrzeni osadniczej Pomezanii” [Nomen (atque) omen? On the boundaries and borderlands in the medieval and modern settlement area of Pomezania], in *Zjawiska magiczno-demoniczne na Warmii i Mazurach i terenach ościennych na przestrzeni wieków* (Olsztyn: Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie, 2014), 85-102; Idem, “Umocnienia liniowe w kontekście osadniczym Pomezanii” [Linear fortifications in the context of Pomezanian settlements], in *Pomorze we wczesnym średniowieczu w świetle źródeł archeologicznych. Historia, stan aktualny i potrzeby badań*, eds. Henryk Paner and Mirosław Fudziński (Gdańsk: Muzeum Archeologiczne w Gdańsku, 2014), 195-216. For a more detailed exploitation of this frontier in relation to the site of Biała Góra see: Aleks Pluskowski, Zbigniew Sawicki, Lisa-Marie Shillito, Monika Badura, Daniel Makowiecki, Mirosława Zabilska-Kunek, Krish Seetah, and Alex Brown, “Biała Góra: The Forgotten Colony in the Medieval Pomeranian-Prussian Borderlands,” *Antiquity* 88, no. 341 (2014): 863-882; Zbigniew Sawicki, Aleks Pluskowski, Alex Brown, Monika Badura, Daniel Makowiecki, Lisa-Marie Shillito, Mirosława Zabilska-Kunek, and Krish Seetah, “Survival at the Frontier of Holy War: Political Expansion, Crusading, Environmental Exploitation and the Medieval Colonising Settlement at Biała Góra, North Poland,” *European Journal of Archaeology* 18, no. 2 (2015): 282-311.

<sup>8</sup> Marek Jagodziński, “Osadnictwo pradziejowe i wczesnośredniowieczne okolic Elbląga. Pograniczny charakter stosunków etnicznych” [Settlements of the antique and early medieval surroundings of Elbląg. The frontier character of ethnic groups], in *750 lat praw miejskich Elbląga. Księga*, ed. Andrzej Groth (Gdańsk: Marpress, 1996), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Powierski, *Prussica 1* (Malbork: Muzeum Zamkowe w Malborku, 2003), 117; Seweryn Szczepański, “Pomezanski gród w Starym Dzierzgoniu” [The Pomezanian castle in Old Dzierzgoniu], *Pruthenia* 3 (2008): 11-34.

<sup>10</sup> Seweryn Szczepański, “Chomor Sancti Adalberti (1249): a możliwości lokalizacji terenowej wybranych kościołów Pomezanii” [Chomor Sancti Adalberti (1249): possible locations of some Pomezanian churches], *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 1, no. 279 (2013): 19-45; Idem, “Campus Schinewite a trwałość pruskiego pogranicza: fragment z dziejów osadnictwa południowej Pomezanii” [A Schinewite campus and the stability of the Prussian borderland: A fragment from the history of settlement in southern Pomezania], *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 3, no. 273 (2011): 547-567.

<sup>11</sup> Mieczysław Haftka, “Mikroregion osadniczy Węgry-Gościszewo-Malbork w świetle kilkunastoletnich obserwacji terenowych” [The Węgry-Gościszewo-Malbork settlement micro-region in the light of several years of field observations], in *Badania archeologiczne w woj. elbląskim w latach 1980-83*, ed. Antoni Pawłowski (Malbork: Muzeum Zamkowe w Malborku, 1987), 41.

<sup>12</sup> Powierski, *Prussica*, 119.

<sup>13</sup> Szczepański, “Chomor Sancti Adalberti.”

<sup>14</sup> Seweryn Szczepański, “Sakralizacja obszaru pogranicza na przykładzie Pomezanii pruskiej” [Sacralization of the border: the example of Prussian Pomezania], *Pruthenia* 6 (2011): 129-156; Seweryn Szczepański, *Pomezania Pruska: Dzieje osadnictwa w XIII-XV wieku* [Prussian Pomezania: History of the settlement in the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries] (Olsztyn: Ośrodek Badań Naukowych im. Wojciecha Kętrzyńskiego, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Powierski, *Prussica*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Wiesław Długokęcki, *Osadnictwo na Żuławach w XIII i na początku XIV wieku* [Settlement in the Żuławy in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century] (Malbork: Muzeum Zamkowe w Malborku, 1992); Szczepański, *Pomezania Pruska*.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Makowiecki, Mirosława Zabilska-Kunek, Krish Seetah, Marc Jarzebowski, and Aleksander Pluskowski, “Farming, Hunting and Fishing in Medieval Prussia: The Zooarchaeological Data,” in Aleksander Pluskowski, ed., *Environment, Colonization and the Baltic Crusader States: Terra Sacra 1* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), in press.

<sup>18</sup> Alex Brown and Aleks Pluskowski, “Detecting the Environmental Impact of the Baltic Crusades on a Late Medieval (13th-15th century) Frontier Landscape: Palynological Analysis from Malbork Castle and Hinterland, Northern Poland,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 38 (2011): 1957-1966; Sawicki et al., “Survival at the Frontier of Holy War.”

<sup>19</sup> Wiesław Długokęcki and Mieczysław Haftka, “Między Santyrem a Malborkiem. Z dziejów osadnictwa wzdłuż północno-zachodniej krawędzi Pojezierza Iławskiego w XIII w.” [Between Santyr and Malbork. The history of settlement along the north-western border of the Iława Lake District in the thirteenth century], in *Mazowsze Pomorze Prusy*, ed. Błażej Śliwiński (Gdańsk: Officina Ferberiana, 2000), 75-88.

<sup>20</sup> See relevant chapters in Pluskowski, ed., *Environment, Colonization and the Baltic Crusader States*.

<sup>21</sup> Marian Biskup, “Sztum,” *Studia z historii budowy miast polskich* 6 (1956): 237-252.

<sup>22</sup> Marc Jarzebowski, Aleksander Pluskowski, Tomasz Nowakiewicz, and Maciej Karczewski, “Re-organising the Prussian Landscape,” in Pluskowski, ed., *Environment, Colonization and the Baltic Crusader State*.

<sup>23</sup> Wiesław Długokęcki, “Młynarstwo w komturstwie malborskim w XIII-XV w.” [Milling in the commandery of Malbork (Marienburg) in the thirteenth-fifteenth century], in *Młyny w Malborku i okolicy od XIII do XIX wieku*, eds. Wiesław Długokęcki, Jan Kuczyński, and Barbara Pospieszna (Malbork: Muzeum Zamkowe w Malborku, 2004), 7-36.